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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000069

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: LEFT OBJECTS TO CONSUL GENERAL'S MEETING WITH JAMIAT-E-ULEMA
HIND LEADER

REF: A) KOLKATA 0041 B) CALCUTTA 0011 C) 06 CALCUTTA 0578

CLASSIFIED BY: Henry V. Jardine, Principal Officer, U.S.
Consulate General Calcutta, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1. (C) Summary: On February 24, ConGen met with West Bengal Jamiat-e-Ulema Hind (JUH) General Secretary Siddiqullah Chowdhury at the JUH offices to discuss Muslim issues and concerns in West Bengal. Chowdhury has come to local prominence recently in leading Muslim opposition to development of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the rural district of Nandigram, where there is a concentration of Muslim villagers. In January, opposition to the SEZ in Nandigram resulted in at least seven deaths in violent clashes between villagers, opposition groups and the state-ruling Leftists (Reftels). Chowdhury indicated that his organization and other Muslim groups plan to form a political party to contest the 2008 elections for village political committees, known as panchayat raj or panchayats, and to increase Muslim political activity. During the meeting, a group of approximately 150 Leftist demonstrators gathered on the narrow street in front of the JUH offices to protest the ConGen's presence, claiming U.S. interference in domestic matters and condemning USG policy in the Middle East. After the meeting, Kolkata police and Special Branch officers provided security, pushing back protestors so that ConGen and POL FSN could enter the vehicle and depart. Extensive media coverage the following day noted the objections of Leftist party officials, primarily the Communist Party of India of India-Marxist (CPM), but also published post's response that the visit was consistent with an extensive program of Muslim outreach conducted by the Consulate. The visit will likely result in CPM and other Leftists remaining hostile to U.S. officials; however, it did serve to highlight USG interest in understanding Muslim views and USG Muslim outreach in the region. No official action is expected as the West Bengal Chief Secretary commented publicly, "We have no objections to foreign

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diplomats meeting leaders of Indian organizations unless they are banned." End Summary.

2. (C) ConGen met with Chowdhury at the JUH offices, located in the narrow streets and alleys of North Kolkata's old Muslim district. Chowdhury has come to prominence in the last month for his efforts at spearheading Muslim opposition to the Government of West Bengal's (GOWB) industrial development plans. The JUH's initial focus was on plans to create a large SEZ in

the rural district of Nandigram, located 150 km southwest of Kolkata. According to Chowdhury, the area was predominantly Muslim and Muslims would see little benefit from the SEZ. Chowdhury said that "We are not against industry but we oppose the setting-up of industries by destroying farmland, houses, educational institution and religious places." He added, if the "Special Economic Zones come up in West Bengal, 70 percent Muslims, 25 percent OBC and 5 percent of other communities would be affected and at least 700 villages will be destroyed." (Note: On February 22, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee said that development plans would shift from Nandigram to the already established Haldia Port Area SEZ. End Note.)

13. (C) ConGen also asked the JUH leader about perceptions of the Muslim experience in West Bengal in light of the Sachar Committee Report on Indian Muslims, which noted that the community has received very little support from the GOWB and experienced significant social disadvantage. Chowdhury and the other JUH members present felt that the CPM and its Left allies only gave lip service to advocating for Muslims and that JUH and other Muslim groups were planning to establish a new political party with some fringe Leftists, such as the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Communist Party of Indian Marxist Leninist (CPIML), to contest the village-level panchayat elections in 2008. Chowdhury noted that JUH has an extensive network throughout India and in West Bengal it has 600,000 members and runs 8,000 primary education centers, including Madrassas. ConGen asked what was taught in JUH's Madrassas. Chowdhury responded that the focus was on religious studies but other modern subjects were covered, like social sciences, languages and mathematics.

14. (C) Soon after the discussion began, noise from a demonstration forming in the street in front of the JUH could be heard. Approximately 150 supporters from the CPM ally Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), led by RJD Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Mohammed Sohrab with some CPM members and other Leftists,

KOLKATA 00000069 002 OF 002

loudly chanted slogans against President Bush, U.S. troops in Iraq and the ConGen's presence in JUH's office. The shouting reverberated in the second-storey meeting room, making conversation difficult. Police and Special Branch officers were present to control the crowd, but on his departure, ConGen was asked to wait while the police cleared access to his vehicle. As the vehicle with police escort departed, there was some pounding on the vehicle hood but no damage or serious violence.

15. (SBU) Coverage in the press the following day noted that the Left and CPM were upset with the visit. English language daily, "The Telegraph" published a lead article entitled "U.S. Steps on Landmine" and had comments from a CPM state committee member asking, "How can the US interfere in our state's affairs? This is an attack on our sovereignty." However, on February 26 the newspaper published an article "Angry with the U.S. but Hands Tied," quoting the West Bengal Chief Secretary A.K. Deb as saying, "We have no objections to foreign diplomats meeting leaders of Indian organizations unless they are banned." In addition, most articles included comments by ConGen and Consulate spokespeople noting, that "the visit was part of the Consulate's Muslim outreach program." The meeting created some confusion within the CPM organization. According to Bengali daily "Bartaman," state committee member and state government minister Rezzak Mollah asked, "How does an Ulema leader meet with the diplomatic mission head of a country like America that considers Islam as an enemy of civilization and is about to pounce on Iran after the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq?"

16. (C) Comment: Clearly, the CPM and Left supporters were indignant over the visit with Chowdhury and JUH leaders, seeing it as interference in domestic issues. However, the GOWB officials and Consulate statements deflected that charge as the meeting with local Muslim leaders was consistent with normal outreach efforts. The strong response from the Left reflected the awareness that the Sachar report and violence in Nandigram have raised serious questions among Muslims about the Left's

support to the community. Historically, the Left has claimed to offer protection to Muslims from sectarian violence and oppression as experienced in Gujarat or elsewhere in India and they have used Muslims as a reliable vote bank in elections. Therefore, JUH's plan to create a Muslim party constitutes a potential challenge to the Left in West Bengal.

17. (C) Comment Continued: A new Muslim political party also may be a reflection of the growing importance and sense of identity of the Muslim community in the states bordering Bangladesh. Bangladesh's high population density and growth will likely contribute to an increase in Muslim migration to India and Muslim political influence. Last year in Assam, a new Muslim party, Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), split off from the Congress Party over the Congress' perceived lack of support to the Muslim community. Anger within the CPM and Left may persist over the visit to Chowdhury but the Chief Secretary's comment to the media reaffirmed that no diplomatic

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norm was violated. The Left's public irritation actually may have helped to highlight the Consulate's engagement with the Muslim community and willingness to listen to its concerns.

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